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## ***Strategic Stakes***

The latest Soviet moves in the Mediterranean (AW&ST Apr. 19 p. 14) emphasize again the enormous strategic stakes that are involved in the North African military equation. Egypt is the keystone of Soviet policy in the Middle East and North Africa and they are pouring their very latest air defense systems into that area to keep it secure as a base for their expansion in two directions:

**First, along the North African littoral of the Mediterranean until they have naval bases with air cover all the way from Alexandria to Mers el Kebir.**

**Second, through the Suez Canal to the Red Sea, enabling them to establish a strong naval force in the Indian Ocean.**

Both objectives have the economic and political goal of controlling the flow of oil to Europe from its African and Middle Eastern sources. Control of the North African littoral could cut off many of the oil supply valves to Europe from Algeria, Libya and the new Red Sea fields. The Soviet navy in the Indian Ocean could threaten a blockade of the Persian Gulf from which tankers stream to Europe.

It is indeed ironic that tremendous U.S. diplomatic pressure has been exerted on Israel to permit opening of the Suez Canal because this is the major Soviet goal in expanding its naval force into the Indian Ocean. The Soviets have already established skeleton naval bases in Yemen, Eritrea and the British-vacated island of Socotra, but they cannot supply them at full strength by the lengthy round the Cape of Good Hope route from Baltic or Black Sea ports or by the Asiatic route from the maritime provinces of Siberia. Secure passage through the Suez Canal is the only way the Soviets can implement their next goal of basing a significant Indian Ocean fleet on the skeleton bases already established in the area. The U.S. Navy's high command is thoroughly alarmed over this prospect and would prefer maintenance of the status quo. So would the Israelis who are reluctant to exchange a strong defensive line on the east bank of the canal for diplomatic assurances. They also are worried about a Soviet naval presence in the Indian Ocean that could threaten their maritime lifeline to Africa and Asia as much as the Egyptian closing of the Straits of Tiran that precipitated the Six Day War of 1967 and the Sinai campaign of 1956.

Meanwhile, the heavy Soviet deployment of air defense equipment to the Middle East has revealed some interesting facets of that equipment and also forced a basic new Israeli strategy to counter it. When the An-22 heavy logistic carrier first appeared in the West at a Paris air show some years ago, long before the USAF C-5A had made its first flight, there was considerable derision by western observers over some of its "old fashioned" equipment such as the giant turboprops with contra-rotating propellers. During the past two years it has emerged as a key component of Soviet foreign policy, providing a swift and secure long-range airlift for key military equipment such as Foxbat and MiG-21J fighters.

Goa (SA-3) and Ganef (SA-4) and Frog 7 missiles complete with mobile self-propelled launchers. In the meantime, USAF has been struggling to eliminate many of the unnecessarily complex features of the C-5A which contribute little to its basic mission performance and escalate its already swollen costs. As a result, the basic strategic value of this type aircraft is being severely questioned in the U.S. and its production curtailed at the very time the Soviets are providing dramatic demonstrations of how it can be used as a basic instrument of national policy.

The new versions of the MiG-21 and the MiG-23 appearing in Egypt also offer more evidence of how the Soviets work diligently on model improvement of basic designs after they are committed to production. The MiG-21J has substantially improved performance over the C models encountered earlier over Egypt and North Vietnam and a number of prior weak points have been remedied. Equipped with an improved air-to-air missile and the digital data link to its airborne fire control system, it is a formidable air-to-air fighter. When the Foxbat first appeared in Soviet skies it was correctly identified as a long-range bomber-killer equipped with downward looking radar and air-to-air missiles aimed at countering the threat from either the defunct B-70 or the emerging B-1. Now they have come up with a lighter version aimed at an air-superiority role with speed and altitude advantages that could have been matched only by the abandoned USAF YF-12 version of its Mach 3 SR-71 black spy plane.

All of these improvements in both the quantity and quality of the Soviet air defense system in Egypt, beginning with the introduction of the SA-3 and MiG-21J plus Soviet pilots and technicians, have forced the Israelis to adopt a new strategy against the time when it may become necessary to penetrate this defense system to blunt an Arab ground offensive.

The Israelis have now shifted from their sensational aircraft penetration tactics of the Six Day War to a first strike capability based on supersonic drones and stand-off missiles aimed at blasting gaps in the ground belts of radars and anti-aircraft missiles to enable strike aircraft to penetrate to Egyptian artillery, armor and other assault forces. The Israelis are still confident that these tactics will enable them to penetrate eventually. But they concede that the quality and scope of the new Soviet air defense system in Egypt would take a heavier toll of their limited supply of Mirage, Phantom and Skyhawk strike aircraft and their pilots. Even with great gaps blasted in the missile belts, the Israeli air force faces a tougher task than ever in clearing the skies of MiG-21Js and Foxbats before they can turn their undivided attention to the ground battles as they did so decisively on the second day of the Six Day War.

The military and strategic equation in the Middle East has changed significantly during the past six months. Only the test of combat will prove which values remain constant.

—Robert Hotz

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